

# NOTION OF OPEN IDENTITY AND ISSUES IN MULTICULTURALISM<sup>78</sup>

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## Abstract

The article raises the question about the principles of peaceful cohabitation in multicultural society. The thesis is that the key of this cohabitation is given by the concept of identity: the way in which human beings perceive themselves, i.e. the type of identity that determines their thinking and mode of living. This might lead either to cultural clashes and civilization shock or to the constructive dialogue and peace. Three concepts of identity that dominate today's world are discussed in this paper: the essentialism, the postmodern concept of identity and the notion of open identity. The author claims that only the latter can resolve difficult problems in the relations between different cultures in our societies.

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**Keywords:** Open identity, multiculturalism, essentialism, postmodernism

## Introduction

The issue of multiculturalism became a huge challenge in contemporary societies. The question here is if there is a way to find principles that would enable people representing a huge range of cultural identities to live together peacefully, i.e. a way that would provide a possibility to establish together a harmonious society or at least to avoid conflicts. We have to look for answers on two levels: national and global one. There have been many answers to this question proposed already, some of which have become world-famous classics of social philosophy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We can remember well the models of social coexistence on a national level constructed in the works of John Rawls (Rawls, 1971), Charles Taylor (Taylor, 1992) or Will Kymlicka (Kymlicka, 1995). Today the process of globalisation requires us to construct similar models on the global scale so that we avoid the hardest blows of “civilizational clash” that Samuel Huntington warned us about 20 years ago (Huntington, 1996). On the global

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level, solutions to the issues of multiculturalism were proposed by Michael Walzer (Walzer, 1994), John Rawls (Rawls 1999) and Hans Küng (Küng, 1998).

Even if not all of the abovementioned thinkers have considered this issue thoroughly, their thoughts are rooted in one issue that is even more fundamental: the issue of the notion of identity. In this paper, we would like to discuss different concepts of the notion of identity that *de facto* influence how different cultures coexist both on the global as well as on the national level. In our opinion, the way that the protagonists of these processes – the human beings – perceive themselves, i.e. type of identity notion that determines their thought and way of live, can lead to either cultural clashes and civilization shock or constructive dialogue and peace. The considerations on how to achieve peace proposed by the abovementioned thinkers will not materialize until they fit with the way of thinking of a particular people and the way they perceive themselves. In order to avoid the risk of falling into the realm of social technologies and social engineering (Popper, 1995), on one hand, and to stay away from the idealistic moralistic talks, on the other, we will not attempt here to answer the question on how to change the ways of thinking. Our aim is to point out only one fundamental factor that actually influences and will continue to actually influence the nature of relationships between people that have different identities. This factor is perception of one's own identity and it can be grouped into three distinct categories: the concept of modern or essentialist identity, postmodern perception of identity and the notion of open identity. Each of those categories is present in any contemporary society. However, combining them in principle is not possible; they compete with each other and a person who chooses one identity automatically rejects the other two.

### **Essentialist conception of identity**

The first notion of identity that is sometimes referred to as essentialism was predominant in the Modern Europe. With its theoretical foundations rooted in the philosophy of Plato, this perception fuelled processes that are very different in their content but similar in their reasoning. It is essentialism that enabled the formation of all political doctrines of the Modern Europe, i.e. liberalism, conservatism and socialism. It is the perception of essentialist identity that gave rise to the movement of romanticism, as well as the idea of the nation state and to some extent of European colonialism. Perceiving and experiencing this type of identity can be viewed as a mechanism that turns concreteness into generalisation. This type of perception implies individual, religious and cultural identity defined in generic terms, where each individual act becomes characterised by its rigid and abstract definition. The main issue faced by such a notion of

identity is closing-up and becoming an enclosed entity, when each encounter with something that does not fit into the generalisation and diverges from a clearly established norm leads to confusion, and this confusion can be cleared up only through violence that requires to fit into an ideal, to restore the norms and having failed that to occupy and to destroy, and if that cannot be done – to distance oneself and to beware. This way of thinking defines monological consciousness, with two propositions to postulate: 1) a dialogue is possible only between subjects that share the same perception of identity; 2) a conversation with subjects that do not share the same perception of identity is possible only when trying to convert them. The notion of identity perceived in this way resulted in the well-known principle of ethnocentrism. In spite of the etymology of this word, this principle entails not only ethnic but also religious, ideological, cultural, national and even European manifestations. The worldviews of romanticism and conservatism, communism and fascism, idealism and colonialism are rooted in this perception, while liberalism can be associated with a particular purely individual “ethnocentrism”, commonly known as the extreme individualism. This notion of identity can result in a powerful, systematic and abstract image of the self as well as being proud of oneself, one’s nation, culture and religion. However, this world-view will lead into conflict when confronted by groups that perceive identity differently. This type of identity will provide answers as to why there are real conflicts in multicultural situations as well as increasing fears of losing one’s identity. If this type of identity is predominant in a society, shock of civilizations is unavoidable.

### **Postmodern perception of identity**

After the two World Wars, a postmodern perception of identity that is radically different from essentialism became predominant in Europe. According to the apologists of postmodernism, it was a reaction to the disadvantages of essentialism that led to the greatest crimes of humanity, such as wars and colonisation. An identity defined by rigid terms is contrasted with an imperative to deconstruct it. This process is supported by the idea that claims a notion of identity to be constructed by power structures as a mechanism for control of people and nations. Therefore, it is essential not only to eliminate all the paradigms of identity that can be found in the history of humanity, e.g. the great stories of civilizations, but also to beware of replacing them by some new constructions that can lead to the formation of an essentialist identity. If a person with an essentialist identity is inclined to enclose oneself within predetermined boundaries, then experiencing postmodern identity means transgressing any kind of boundaries. One cannot dwell in any one place, one has to become “homeless” (Agamben, 1998), cultured without a culture, religious without a religion (Derrida, 1992), a

citizen without a state, a human when there is no notion of humanity. The issue that is faced by postmodernism is some kind of feebleness of a human being, a sense of loss, which, contrary to the claims of postmodern thinkers, results in exhaustion of creativity as well as spiritual, psychological and social weakness. In multicultural environment, a society that is managed in accordance with the principles of postmodernism is too fragile and its members are incapable to confront destructive powers. While proclaiming peace, they become unable to confront war. It could be claimed that demands to deconstruct substantial identity posed by the supporters of postmodernism who do not propose any other alternative result in the loss of an ability to resist the most aggressive forms of substantial identity, such as Islamic fundamentalism.

Hence the fiasco of postmodernism becomes more and more evident in the contemporary Europe. This results in more and more clearly expressed rebirth of the notion of essentialist identity and a new ethnocentrism that manifests itself through increasing support for radical right throughout Europe. With the postmodern project having failed to meet the expectations, people automatically turn towards the enclosed entity model, as if there is no other alternative. Today's Lithuania, Europe and many other places throughout the world are balancing between experiencing a shallow postmodern identity and demanding for rigid notion of identity only to reveal that most people do not see a third alternative.

### **Notion of open identity**

Our thesis is that the tradition of the European thought (in both its Greek and Biblical forms) offers one more notion of identity and a way to experience it, enabling to surpass the opposition between essentialism and postmodernism. With reference to the terminology developed by Popper (Popper, 1995) and Bergson (Bergson, 2008), we call this notion of identity an open identity. Rooted in the Christian perception of a human as a person (Aleksandravicius, 2012), this notion of open identity performs a natural synthesis of essentialism and postmodernism, where some of the claims are integrated and the other – rejected. On one hand, open identity means that the need for well-defined identity that has normative powers is emphasized; on the other hand, open identity underlines the importance of permanent process of identity review that provides new content for it, arising from its concreteness and the experience of its otherness and difference. Such a relationship with oneself and one's reality leads to the development of the dialogical consciousness. In our opinion, dialogical consciousness becomes a key to resolving multiculturalism-related issues. The notion of open identity or dialogical consciousness can be expressed as follows: my identity enters into a relationship with the identity of the other in such a way that it enriches

and strengthens my identity. Rather than being destroyed, my identity develops when it gets in contact with another identity. For example, a wide range of the elements of European culture helped to develop the Lithuanian identity rather than to impoverish it. Yet another example is the work of a Lithuanian composer Bronius Kutavičius: the folksongs from the Northeastern Lithuania do not lose their identity in his work when they are combined with the elements from Japanese music. On the contrary, new qualities of the songs are revealed through this process. When Catholic monks adopt practices coming from Zen-Buddhism their Catholic identity is not betrayed; it is deepened. A concept of “fusion of horizons” established by Gadamer becomes fully relevant here (Gadamer, 1960).

The concept of open identity does pose some risks. At times openness becomes syncretism. In order to avoid that, we must respect the wholeness of human identity and the need for harmony. One cannot combine everything with everything. Dialogical consciousness is not as changeable as a chameleon but rather it is an attempt to live a fully-fledged rather than abstract life. Open identity is *œuvre de création*.

Perception and experience of open identity is a way to solve issues posed by multiculturalism at both national and international levels but for that to work dialogical consciousness must be acquired by a large enough number of people.

### **Open identity and the multicultural public space**

What distinguishes modern society is multiculturalism. It was caused by the migration, which in modern times has been increasing more and more and which has especially intensified in the last hundred years due to the political and economic world configuration. Although this is not a rule without exception, nowadays, looking around any continent, one would hardly find a country that is not multicultural, and the process of globalisation that should make people think of the world as a single unit, impels one to speak about multicultural world society. This situation raises a challenge: multiculturalism has to be turned into a factor for social integration, not division. An essentialist identity of the modern times determines the formation of unicultural society, thus it inevitably leads to a conflict on a national or global scale: terrorist attacks of today are a typical though radical discharge of the essentialist identity (the case of Breivik in Norway, the terrorist event of *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris, Al-Qaeda and Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, etc). The postmodern version of identity determines the levelling of individuals and performs the function of homogenising society, but by refusing to integrate culturally unique elements, it forms a lifeless and worthless type of society which lacks wisdom and strength, typical of human maturity. According to the thesis of this paper, only open

identity is suitable for the development of an integrated multicultural society. According to A. Cortina, a Spanish philosopher, “only a dialogue between live cultures can give birth to an equally live and universal ethics; only the motivation that has roots in the most lively dimension of human existence can encourage men to take action” (Cortina, 2004: 264-265).

The argument why the multicultural public space must be governed by dialogic consciousness is of an anthropological type. Openness is a fundamental state in which human consciousness functions, and it does not simply arise from an objective need of a peaceful coexistence, dictated by external factors (Aleksandravicius, 2012). More profound than the social contract that is unavoidable but ephemeral and appealing only to external human behaviour, is a principle of mutual recognition that functions in the spiritual human space. This is exactly the reason why the political peace, if pursued according to the dialogic principle, would be the most authentic and enduring: the order of social environment would comply with the very human ontology and with the man as an open essence. The social public space should be dialogic as the very human consciousness is: “From the political perspective, the means necessary for the formation of a right society can issue only from an intercultural dialogue and from the deepest understanding of the needs that are cherished by individuals of different cultural backgrounds” (Cortina, 2004: 278). In this way, one faces a new question of how it could be possible to turn this intercultural and universal dialogic consciousness, or the principle of mutual recognition, into a normative power that regulates social public space. A. Cortina suggests that public space should be regulated according to “minimal ethics” (Cortina, 1986). It would create social conditions for the promotion of different identities that actualise themselves as separate 'maximal ethics', since it would bring individuals and groups that practise them into constant contact, regulated by universal laws of rational dialogue that were widely discussed by O. Apel, J. Habermas or Ch. Taylor.

According to A. Cortina, ethics that regulates public space cannot be some sort of world-view construct, but must express a pluralistic “social truth” (Cortina, 2004). Therefore, it should not be aimed at personal development in the sense of world-view or happiness, but rather at social justice that would create conditions for such an objective of development in private space. Public ethics would unite individuals as citizens rather than as subjects of a certain cultural tradition. The crucial problem is to set the principles that would guide the 'minimal', that is, civil or public ethics, and 'maximal' – ethics that is freely practised in private space and that is based on a certain cultural tradition as well as defines the identity of substance. A. Cortina discusses these principles in detail in her works. This essay limits itself to the description of their model: 1. Relationship between the social

and the world-view ethics can be neither competitive, outmanoeuvring any of them, nor parallel, severing radically one from the other; it has to be integrating; 2. Public ethics must regard separate world-view ethics as a source for itself, i.e. continuously integrate, using the social dialogue, certain ideas from these ethics, and especially those arguments that motivate social peace and justice; 3. World-view ethics in their entirety have to treat social ethics as their own norm in the national space, i.e. they have to abstain from any action that could compromise social peace and justice. It can be seen that open identity is not simply an internal notion or business of private space, but it also acts as a source of concrete principles that regulate the functioning of society.

## **Conclusion**

The notion of open identity is a determining factor when modern man solves his spiritual and political problems. It restores the relationship between an individual and other people, allowing one to participate again in one's own truth as well as to actualize one's own existence as open to reality, without the necessity of renouncing one's identity. On the political level, open identity is necessary for a double reason: only it allows democracy to renew its authenticity and only it creates conditions for peace and justice in today's multicultural society. It is doubtful whether there is any other way to solve problems of a pluralistic and globalised world.

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